DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 188 231 CS 205 660

AUTHOR Halpern, Jeanne W.
TITLE Teaching Writing: The Underlying Structure of Composition Courses.
PUB DATE Mar 80
NOTE 13p.: Based on paper presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication (Washington, DC, March, 14, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Higher Education: Teaching Guides: Teaching Methods: *Writing (Composition): *Writing Instruction: Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS Audience Awareness

ABSTRACT

This paper identifies and describes the five components that underlie the structure of any advanced composition course: audience, purpose, voice, organization, and polish. Each component is illustrated with examples from technical writing, business writing, journalism, and academic writing. (FL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

TEACHING WRITING: THE UNDERLYING STRUCTURE OF COMPOSITION COURSES

by

Jeanne W. Halpern

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Jeanne W. Halpern

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ED188231

One evening, as I walked into my dining room to write this paper, I looked critically at my "desk." There were two coffee cups, an electric typewriter, books, and files labelled "technical writing," "business writing, "journalism," and "academic writing"--all spread across my spacious, five-legged dining room table. I wonder today if it was this coincidence of subject and setting that prompted me to visualize advanced composition as a table with five legs.

Whatever the inspiration, the image was fortuitous. I had already come to the conclusion that every advanced composition course I taught had five elements--audience, purpose, voice, organization, and polish. "If we teachers," I thought, "can visualize advanced composition as a structure with five components, we should be able to teach any upper level writing course, no matter what the specific content, with confidence."

The purpose of this article is to explain the five components essential to advanced composition and to illustrate their general applicability with examples from technical writing, business writing, journalism, and academic writing.

Audience

One component, or goal, of any advanced writing course is to teach writers to analyze their audiences and adapt their writing to those audiences. Sometimes--as when journalism students write news stories for the campus

---

*Based on a paper presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Washington, D.C., March 14, 1980.

CS205660

paper--the audience is known, palpable, has eyes, skin, hair. More often, however, students must fictionalize their audiences--pretend they know the manager to whom their progress report is addressed, know her well enough to convince her that progress has, indeed, been made. Whether the audience is real or fictionalized, however, students can learn to write for specific audiences if we teach them to make certain distinctions and ask certain questions.

Students must learn to distinguish between three separate operations: analyzing the audience, determining the effect they want to achieve with that audience, and taking the steps necessary to achieve that effect. We can easily teach our students to consider and analyze their audiences--I use an audience analysis chart for every assignment, and students fill it in quickly and accurately. I find it more difficult, however, to have students define the effect they want to achieve: Do they want their audience to understand, to feel, to act? And it is most difficult, as Linda Flower showed in College English, to teach students to adapt the organization and language of their communications for their audiences, to teach students to convert their writer-based prose to reader-based prose.[1] Filling in an audience analysis chart, then, is only the first step of a complex cognitive operation which students of advanced writing must learn.

Sometimes, if the audience is known and fairly limited, and if the assignment is conventional, distinguishing between audience analysis, effect, and adaptation is easy. Consider, for example, the two memos written by Amanda Patterson to inform peers and superiors of a recommendation to serve dinner the first night of finals week.

Example 1: Audience of peers

To: Counseling Staff
From: Mandy Patterson
Date: 11/1/79
Subject: Dinner Extension During Finals

I thought you'd want to know the results of the questionnaire we filled out about food service during finals week. We all agreed that supper should be served for Jarrison students in the dorm on Sunday -- the first exam night -- and that chili or sandwiches would be fine. I'll send our opinion to Mr. Blotner and let you know what happens after he forwards it to RHA. Thanks for your help!

Example 2: Audience of superiors

To: Mr. Blotner, Manager of Jarrison Hall
From: Amanda Patterson, Staff Resident, Unit D.
Date: November 1, 1979
Subject: Dinner Extension for Students During Finals

Due to a reshuffling of the final examination schedule, tests now begin on Sunday, December 16. Residence Hall Administration (RHA) wants to determine whether food service should be extended to include a Sunday evening meal on December 16. You asked me to find out the opinion of our counseling staff concerning the dinner extension so that you can report it to RHA. I have consulted my staff about the possibility of a food service extension; my findings and recommendations are outlined below.

Findings

The counseling staff of Unit D of Jarrison Hall feels that an extension of food service to include Sunday dinner on December 16 would be helpful to the residents. Students under academic pressure of final examinations will be engrossed in studies. Having the convenience of a Sunday evening meal during finals will save them a trip out to eat and save them a few dollars for the Christmas season. Furthermore, we are able to provide one additional meal under the provisions of the meal contract.

Recommendations

We suggest that an easy meal such as sandwiches or chili be served, minimizing the staff necessary to work the dinner. Perhaps the serving time could be shortened to 5:00-6:00 p.m. This would help student employees, who would not have to work a long dinner shift.

You may present our opinion at your next RHA meeting. Hopefully our input will aid in the final decision for a dinner addition during finals week. If you have any questions concerning our opinion, please call me at 4268.

This is how Amanda assessed her audiences:

Analysis: In the shorter memo, my audience includes staff members who are my peers. They filled out the questionnaires and want to know what the results are and what happens next. In the longer memo, my audience includes my superiors: our hall manager, Mr. Blotner, and the entire Residence Hall Administration staff. They want to know what each residence hall staff thinks about the dinner extension.

Effect: I want to keep Jarrison staff members informed and to persuade Mr. Blotner and RHA to extend dinner through Sunday. I also want to keep the good will of both groups.

Adaptation: I must design the staff memo to be informative and friendly; this means giving the facts and showing appreciation. I must design the RHA memo to be clear and persuasive; this means organizing the facts to support our position and suggesting how to implement the extension efficiently. I want to sound persuasive and helpful.

These assessments were relatively easy for Amanda because she knew her primary audiences, what she wanted to achieve, and how to achieve it.

Sometimes, however, the process of audience analysis and adaptation is not so easy. Right now, I do not feel especially confident about my perception of you as an audience because I am not sure who reads the

Journal of Advanced Composition. Here is my tentative assessment of you--as I sit at my dining room table in West Lafayette.

Analysis: My audience is homogeneous, though very different in age, background, experience, job pressures, content areas.

Effect: I want to persuade my audience that five cognitive processes underlie all the advanced composition courses I have taught, and that teachers should think of these processes as the underlying structure of advanced composition. I want to shift their focus from teaching content to teaching process.

Adaptation: My article must be nuts and bolts enough for those who are pedagogically oriented, but adequately grounded in theory for those who are research oriented. To reach both groups, I should use anecdote, metaphor, examples, and allusions to the work of a few key writers.

My problem, you see, differed from Amanda's problem because she knew her audiences and I had to fictionalize you. In both cases, however, being able to distinguish between audience analysis, effect, and adaptation led to a finished product consciously designed for real people. To help your students develop a cognitive operation which focuses on audience, you can have them answer these six questions:

* Who is my primary audience?
* What effect do I want to achieve with this audience?
* What use will this audience make of my writing?

* What features can I add, condense, or omit for this audience?
* How can I organize my writing to help my audience understand and use it?
* How can I format, revise, and edit my writing to help this audience?

Purpose

A second essential goal in any advanced writing class is to teach students to state their purpose. Whether you belong to the left phalanx of the writing camp, defending Peter Elbow's Writing Without Teachers[2] against all attackers, or whether you stand to the right of center, raising your flag over Sheridan Baker's Practical Stylist,[3] your generals share one strategy: They may call it finding "your center of gravity" or honing "your argumentative edge," but they agree that students must be able to formulate a clear statement of purpose.

How to state a purpose clearly, however, often baffles a writer--whether she is a student in engineering or an executive at IBM. The best advice on writing purpose statements I have discovered comes from the systems analysis approach used by J. C. Mathes and Dwight Stevenson in their textbook, Designing Technical Reports.[4] Mathes and Stevenson show how an organizational problem prompts an assignment, which prompts a staff member's technical tasks, which prompts his or her rhetorical tasks, which end in a report which circulates through the organization. This systematic analysis produces a three-step cognitive procedure for formulating purpose statements, which can be taught to students as a series of questions.

* What is the general context or problem to which this writing responds?
* What is the specific difficulty, question, or assignment?
* What is the rhetorical purpose? (The purpose of this communica- this is to what?)

Answering these questions allows any writer to move into any communication--and effectively take his or her reader along. The following samples of opening paragraphs from technical writing, business writing, journalism, and academic writing illustrate the general applicability of this procedure.

Example 1: Technical Writing

American President Lines Report

On August 8, 1969, American President Lines authorized specification changes on five Seamasters through the issuance of Change Order No. 16 (ref. e.). The Owner in making this economic decision relied upon a preliminary cost estimate given by Doe Shipbuilding, the Contractor. The Contractor now submits a final estimate exceeding the preliminary estimate by 600%. The Owner considers this final estimate unreasonable, and in accordance with standard contractual procedure asks Marad to establish a fair and reasonable cost. The Owner requests Marad to review and adjudicate this final estimate.

Example 2: Business Writing

Bell Telephone Company Memo

In planning our credit card insert system, we are gathering information from other companies using the system. You asked me to contact Mark Jenkinson to find out how Indiana Bell manages its system and what its response has been. The following information summarizes the Indiana Bell program.

Example 3: Journalism

Journal & Courier, February 24, 1980, Page 1

"Grades stand unchanged in cheating battle"

The three students failed for cheating by Prof. Donna Fowler are still considered failures, according to Dr. Allan H. Black, Dean of the School of Science. "At this time the grades she assigned stand unchanged," Black said Saturday in a position paper on the controversy involving Prof. Fowler's strict rules of honesty. Black said the action of the School of Science grade appeals committee that ruled against Fowler was not binding, explaining his position as follows.

Example 4: Academic Writing (English)

English 301 paper by Brian Welch, December 8, 1980

"Art's Immortality in Keats' 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'"

The immortality of art is the dominating theme in John Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn." The permanence of art cannot be disturbed by time; a moment can live forever exactly as the artist depicts it -- in sculpture, music, poetry. In this paper, I will show how Keats develops this theme in three complementary ways in "Ode on a Grecian Urn."

Each of these examples begins with the general or organizational context, moves into the specific or technical question, and ends with a statement of rhetorical purpose. If students can learn to ask the three key questions when they begin writing, they will have learned a second process which characterizes advanced writing: clear formulation of purpose statements.

Voice or Persona

The third goal in advanced writing is to teach students to adopt a voice or assume a persona appropriate to their audience and purpose. How can we teach students to control "voice"? In an article in College Composition and Communication, I describe one way.[5] I show how the editors of an oral biography project tried to create a written "voice" for their interviewee--a "voice" containing as many idiosyncratic features of his spoken voice as possible--while, at the same time, depersonalizing the "voices" of the interviewers by omitting all idiosyncratic features. This technique does not, of course, differ much from Mark Twain's use of syntactic, lexical, and mechanical features to distinguish Huck Finn's voice from ole Jim's. Students in any advanced writing class should be encouraged to write--as Walker Gibson put it--"tough, sweet, or stuffy" by being taught to manipulate language on paper as effectively as they do face to face.[6]

Nor is this a particularly difficult task, once the constraints of purpose and audience are clear. Notice, for example, the different voices Amanda Patterson adopts in the two memos above. In the version to her fellow counselors, Amanda uses enough short words, personal pronouns, contractions, and loose punctuation to qualify--almost--as one of Gibson's "sweet talkers." On the other hand, in her memo to Mr. Blotner and other superiors at RHA, she sounds downright stuffy! Most students know how to adapt voice in writing, but not how to control this adaptation--to do it consciously, to do it craftily. To help them develop a process which focuses on voice, you can have them ask this set of questions each time they write:

* Is my voice appropriate to my purpose?

  Too formal? Too casual?

* Is my language appropriate to my audience?

  Too complicated? Too abstract? Too ambiguous?

* Do I use organization, paragraphing, sentence structure, words, and mechanics to enhance my voice?

Organization

The fourth goal, and one that I'm certain we pay considerable attention to, is teaching students to formulate appropriate organizational patterns for their work. I am disturbed by the formulas in business writing textbooks, with their checklists and their signs referring to mechanical errors. I am disturbed by a programmed instruction series in journalism which reduces article writing to a fill-in-the-blanks puzzle. I am even disturbed by my friend Sheridan Baker's keyhole, with its one-solution-fits-all-problems approach to essay writing. These formulas disturb me because they attend only to product.

I prefer to teach process: to discuss possible organizational patterns, to offer options, to emphasize that the solution depends on the problem. Specifically, I want students to conceive of organization as a means of achieving a purpose with an audience. One set of organizational questions which emphasizes process is:

* Does the structure of my discussion support the purpose of my communication? (For example, if making a recommendation or taking a strong position, have I developed my discussion persuasively?)
* Is my material organized according to the interests, needs, and expectations of my audience?
* Does my structure have an underlying logic, moving from general to specific and from most important to least important (as in business, technical, or journalistic writing) or from least important to most important (as in certain essay forms)?
* Have I chosen appropriate patterns for the various units of my communication? Have I included, when necessary, units of definition, description, cause/effect, process, persuasion, and so on?

By asking such questions, student writers adapt organization to purpose and audience, as Amanda did in the two preceding memos. The first, an informational summary for peers, moves from general to specific and contains one chronological unit. The second, a persuasive memo for superiors, moves from general to specific, but is developed with two persuasive units: "Findings" contains four reasons, and "Recommendations" demonstrates the ease of implementing the plan. The organization of each communication suits its purpose and audience.

Polish

The fifth essential goal of an advanced writing course is to teach students to polish their work. Polishing is a finishing process, a reviewing process, a checking-for-flaws process, which gives the writer at least some assurance that the communication is an effective as he or she can make it. Polishing encourages the writer to ask:

* Does my format signal the intellectual design of my communication?
* Has my revision succeeded in clarifying this communication for my audience?
* Has my editing removed distractions such as needless words and mechanical errors?
* Does this communication represent my best writing?

I have not seen the drafts of most of the writing I admire, but I have seen the drafts of the article you are reading, and I can assure you that my review of the format, my revision, and my editing not only cut this paper by a third, but made it more logical, more clear, and more precise. And polishing took me three times as long as writing my first draft!

How to manage audience, purpose, voice, organization, and polishing: this is the underlying structure of any advanced writing course. Put the content of any specific subject--from business writing to scientific writing--on this five-legged table and you will have ample support for your teaching. And your students will have learned processes they can apply to any writing challenge they meet--in college or beyond.

Footnotes

[1] Flower, Linda, "Writer Based Prose: A Cognitive Basis for Problems in Writing," College English, Vol. 41, #4, September 1979, pp. 19-37.

[2] Elbow, Peter, Writing Without Teachers, New York: Oxford, 1973.

[3] Baker, Sheridan, The Practical Stylist, New York: Harper & Row, 1977.

[4] Mathes, J. C. and Dwight Stevenson, Designing Technical Reports: Writing for Audiences in Organizations, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1976, pp. 24-42.

[5] Halpern, Jeanne W. "Differences Between Speaking and Writing and Their Implications for Teaching," College Composition and Communication, forthcoming, October 1980.

[6] Gibson, Walker, Tough, Sweet & Stuffy: An Essay on Modern American Prose Styles, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966.